

## Aviation Biography – Joe Connell.

Joe after his 2015 Flight Review – thanks for the ride Joe ☺



As a farm boy living in northwest Iowa, I was fascinated with aviation from the very beginning. I launched cats from the top of our barn using mom's dish towel as their parachutes. Neither mom nor the cats appreciated the adventure! Model airplanes hung from my bedroom ceiling. I would leave the dinner table to identify any airplane that passed over our farm.

When Sputnik was launched on October 4, 1957, I was a college freshman. Several friends and I launched rockets on frozen Storm Lake that winter. My dad later terminated my rocket career when I had a "small" propellant fire in our basement!

To pay for college I scrubbed floors in our county hospital at night. After two years of work, college, courting a girlfriend, mediocre grades, misdirection, and general fatigue, I decided to put college aside and explore military service to get my priorities aligned.

I was informed of the Aviation Cadet program by our Air Force recruiter. Upon completion, I would be commissioned and would receive my wings. Upon completion of all tests, if I passed, I would be assigned to a pilot training class even before I had incurred an obligation to the Air Force. In January, 1960, I joined the Air Force at Offutt AFB in Omaha and flew commercial to Lackland AFB near San Antonio, TX. I was 21 years old; I got airsick on the flight down; and I wondered what I was getting into!

"Pre-flight" was the Air Force version of boot camp. We had a gentle drill sergeant (and that was all he taught us - to march.) The real power structure was our upper class cadets and they relished their assignment. Much of our day was spent in academics: math, geometry, trigonometry, geo-politics, history of the Air Force, Code of Conduct, and much more. The rest was marching, meals, physical training, etc. We were the last class of Aviation Cadets, 61-G. All future pilot training candidates would have college degrees. This would create challenges several years later for promotion considerations.

Three months later I was assigned to Bainbridge Air Base in SE Georgia for primary flight training. Our instructors were civilians. There we flew and soloed in the Beechcraft T-34. After 30 hours in the T-34 we moved into the Cessna T-37s. We began night flying, aerobatics, instrument flying, solo cross-country navigation. We lost a fellow cadet from vertigo while night flying and another, possibly from hypoxia, on a cross country flight. The latter part of our syllabus required us to fly dual with two cadets in a T-37. This eventually led to unauthorized formation flights, dog fights, and other life-challenging escapades. From this I learned an important lesson: NEVER FLY WITH SOME WHO IS BRAVER THAN YOU ARE! After a total of 130 hours at Bainbridge I was assigned to Vance AFB near Enid, OK.



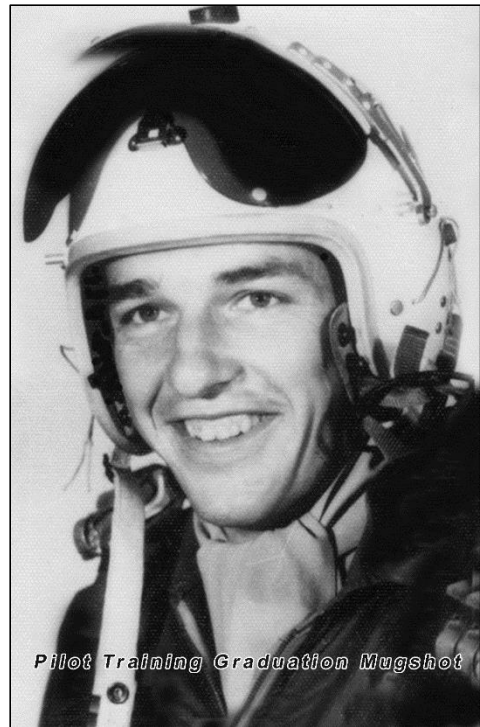
T-34, T-37 and T-33



*T-33 Formation Flying*

At Vance our instructors were Air Force and our aircraft was the Lockheed T-33. I really enjoyed the plane. We moved heavily into instrument flying, formation, aerobatics with emphasis on precision and standardization. After 130 more hours of flight time and 50 hours of simulator I graduated and was commissioned in June 1961. Aircraft choices for me were F-102s, KC-97s, B-47s, C-130s, C-124s, a C-119(!), and helicopters. A handful of F-100 slots went immediately. The majority of assignments were in SAC. That meant a lot of alert duty – the same for F-102s. The rest of the aircraft were heavy haulers. My instructor went ballistic when I selected helicopters!

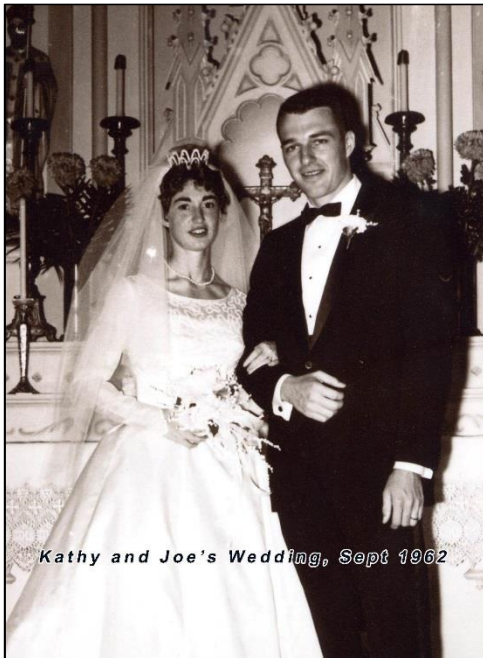
I had 3 weeks of survival school at Stead AFB near Reno before starting helicopters. Helicopter school was also at Stead. We flew H-19s and H-21s for about 5 months. It was a different kind of flying: no trim, no hands-off flying, motorcycle type throttle, heavy constant use of rudder pedals, a lot of concentration. The first approaches seem very steep and it was alarming to see the airspeed fall to almost nothing on the approach and yet not fall out of the sky. It seemed to violate everything I had previously learned. In time it became easier and automatic. Reno altitude is close to 5,000 feet. We did a lot of mountain flying around 8,000 feet. Performance was marginal and we flew with half loads of fuel during the summer.



*Pilot Training Graduation Mugshot*

I took 30 days leave after completing helicopter training in February 1962. During my Air Force time I had gained

a pen-pal. Kathy was a college classmate of my sister Jean. Kathy had been writing me daily for most of two years. During that time Jean married and Kathy came to the wedding and met my parents. During leave I drove from IA to eastern IL where Kathy was teaching. On the way through her home town I met her parents. We had met each other's parents but not each other! Ten days after I finally met Kathy she asked when I was going to ask her to marry me! We married in September 1962. We lived on Air Force bases in New Hampshire and Maine.



*Kathy and Joe's Wedding, Sept 1962*



*Call Sign Pedro  
HH - 43*

During this time I cross trained into HH-43B helicopters for search and rescue coverage in the regional area. Three weeks after our marriage the Cuban Missile Crisis loomed. I was confined to base, Kathy was isolated to our apartment off base, and our helicopters were scheduled to be positioned in southern Florida. After 3 weeks everything settled down.

Our daughter Carolyn was born in November 1963.

Rescue activity was busy in Maine. My crew rescued an F-106 pilot from his burning plane after his ejection set failed. We performed numerous rescues of fisherman and hunters in the area – some in winter.

The Gulf of Tonkin Incident occurred in August 1964. Kathy was now pregnant with our second child. In early September I was alerted for a combat search and rescue assignment in Vietnam. Two weeks were spent in Panama for Jungle Survival School. Kathy and Carolyn returned to Iowa to live with her parents.

I spent a month in Reno as we formed two detachments for deployment. One afternoon was spent firing a 38 revolver on the firing range. We were able to get about 10 hours in the HH-43F which we would be flying in Vietnam. It had a bigger engine, a bit of armor plating around critical areas, a 200 foot hoist cable for deep jungles, and self-sealing tanks. In late October our detachments boarded a C-130. We flew to Travis AFB in California, to Hawaii, Wake Island, and Clark AFB in the Philippines. Following 2 days of briefings, we flew into Bien Hoa, South Vietnam, about 30 miles NE of Saigon. Our sister detachment was assigned to Da Nang, South Vietnam, near the Demilitarized Zone separating the two Vietnams.

We replaced 2 H-43B crews that had been there on temporary duty (TDY) since the Gulf of Tonkin Incident. The first few days were spent receiving and assembling our 3 HH-43Fs followed by several training and area orientation flights. Extensive briefings covered recovery procedures, remote fuel sites, operational frequencies, call signs, personal equipment and authentication codes, and all of necessary information to become operational.

Five days after we arrived our base was heavily mortared. Four service men were killed, 72 injured, 18 aircraft were either destroyed or damaged including 1 of the TDY HH-43Bs. I found myself "defending" a concertina wire barrier with a 38 revolver while dressed only in my underwear. We were subsequently issued M-16 rifles.





Our base has about 2 dozen B-57s, large number of A-1Es and A-1Hs, a dozen or so O-1s, many UH-1B gunships and UH-1D transports ("slicks"), and a U-2. During my year just about every kind of transient aircraft landed at the base.

Our major mission was local base rescue for battle damaged aircraft. We could attach a 1,000 pound fire suppression kit (FSK) on a sling under the helicopter; transport it the scene of a crash; off load the FSK along with 2 crewmen trained as firefighters; foam a path to the cockpit; extricate the crew; and transport them to medical facilities. Helicopter rotor wash would knock down, cool, and suppress flames. A normal response time to start the helicopter, hover to and attach the sling load, and depart to the crash site or enter orbit off the end of the runway was around 90 seconds. On one day one of our crews responded to 12 aircraft emergencies in 24 hour period. Hung ordnance was our greatest concern. It was heart-stopping to see a bomb or napalm depart the aircraft and tumble down the runway while we were intercepting the aircraft.

Our helicopters were one of the few equipped with hoists in Vietnam. We covered the majority of rescue missions (either aircrew members or troops on the ground) in jungle areas. On a number of occasions ground troops used explosives to blow holes in the jungle canopy for facilitate hoist operations. In one instance we were able to descend directly to the jungle floor with our helicopters. We later carried chain saw as part of our equipment.

With exception of providing direct rescue coverage for scheduled Agent Orange spray missions (Operation Ranch Hand) few of our missions were scheduled or predictable. We had numerous medevac and search missions where the downed pilot had radio contact. Our helicopters had about a 75 mile range depending upon configuration, loiter time, and hover time. As such, we knew the location of available fuel from the Mekong Delta to the Central Highlands. I don't recall any missions exceeding 100 miles although low fuel lights were a common occurrence!

During my tour, all of our missions were in-country. We would launch immediately and draw on local airborne resources for ground fire suppression, usually A-1s, Huey gunships or a combination of both. To this day I can recognize the sound of an Army Huey helicopters and I'm flooded with memories. The sound of the emergency locator beacon during the yearly ELT check still affects me. Our mission call sign was "Pedro". It is still used on combat search and rescue missions today in the Middle East.

We maintained 2 of our 3 helicopters on an immediate launch status. We stationed 2 crews 24 hours a day housed in a sand-bagged trailer immediately near the helicopters. A 3<sup>rd</sup> crew was 5 minute standby.

In event of an off base mission, the 3<sup>rd</sup> helicopter assumed an immediate launch posture. One of our crewmen in each helicopter was a Pararescue Specialist – SCUBA, EMT, and parachute trained.

Our son Ken was born in late March of 1965. He was 7 months old before I saw him for the first time. Mail took 5 days to reach home. Kathy and I wrote daily – even if it was just an “I’m OK” note. This was particularly true if a major newsworthy incident happened on base or around Saigon.

On May 16<sup>th</sup> 1965 there was a major explosion on the flight line. There were 27 fatalities, 14 aircraft destroyed, countless aircraft damaged including 1 of our helicopters. Apparently a delayed-action 500 pound bomb detonated prematurely. We were heavily involved in medical evacuations.



HH-43Fs were also used for combat search and rescue in North Vietnam. The helicopters were staged from sites near the Demilitarized Zone, from border bases in Thailand and from several “Lima Sites” in Laos. Its short range, wooden rotor blades, and lack of defensive weapons lead to the deployment of HH-3E in 1965 and HH-53 “Jolly Green Giants” somewhat later. These twin-turbine helicopters featured air-to-air refueling with HC-130s, extensive range, and defensive weapons.



I returned home in October 1965 after a year in Vietnam and 459 missions. I was assigned detachment commander of a helicopter unit in West Texas. During this time our unit covered numerous emergencies including a flash flood in eastern New Mexico, a T-38 crash, a C-130 crash, and an SR-71 crash near Tucumcari, NM. In the following year I separated from the Air Force and joined IBM in Texas as a field engineer then moved to marketing. My career with IBM spanned 34 years in Texas, Iowa, and in Minnesota. During these years Julie, Jim, and Sharon increased our happy household. Kathy died of cancer in 1994. Sometime later Jan entered my life and I have been forever blessed by her gentleness and love.

In the 1990s I built a Kitfox-II, and upon retirement, Jan and I built an RV-9A. While I like to fly, I am passionate about anything dealing with aircraft, their history, and their construction.

Here are links to a couple soundbites and a video clip Joe sent along. [Emergency locator beacon](#) sound, [Helicopter start up](#) sound, [video clip of HH-43F counter rotating blades](#).



Joe's Wife, Jan, playing the Rosie the Riveter on their RV-9A



RV-9A, N95JJ (John Hanson and Dick Fechter having fun with Joe's Girl)